

Shall we dance?

ThreeFourth

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Table of Contents

Title Page
Copyright Information
Table of Contents
Summary
1. Shall we dance?

Summary

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Description:

This man was the most bizarre of all, if only because he had a normal human shape wrapped in an alien air. By all accounts, humans should not be exuding such strangeness.

1. Shall we dance?

Disclaimer : English second language.

These late receptions where she had to appear besides her mother always left Garnet feeling she was but a secondary character, sidelined by the protagonists of the play. Tonight was no exception. Dinner had been served to no less than a hundred and thirty five people and more than three hours had passed on the great water-clock at the end of the hall before servants removed the plates and tables from the room. Chairs were lined along the walls and a quintet appeared to play chamber music.

She had exchanged a few words with the noblewoman sitting at her left but she had not been able to make out her name through the ambient noise. The lady obviously knew her, but the princess could swear she had never seen her face before and had to carefully weight her words to hide the fact she had no idea who she was talking to. After a few minutes, an old alexandrian courtier had approached them and offered the lady a dance. Garnet was silent and alone now, queen Brahne discussed state matters with a small group of foreign ambassadors, flanked

by captain Steiner, who was charged with safety of the honourable guests.

She was lost in thought when a tall and slender shape moved close to her without a sound and took a sit right next to her. When she looked aside, she saw a tall Burmecia in ornate ceremonial armour, marvelling at the agility and silence he could maintain while wearing enough metal to make plates and utensils for a family of six.

“I could not avoid noticing you have been quite silent and sullen this evening princess.”

She was pleasantly surprised someone had noticed.

“It is nothing sir, I simply know very few of our guests and I try not to be a burden to my mother when she is busy with her royal duty.”

“I had guessed so much.”

He turned and leaned slightly towards her. He still towered over her and she noticed a dragon-shaped carving on his left spaulder.

“Your mother has been very secretive for a few months. More than usual at least. Our embassies have found her declarations to be confusing for

about a year. It has also been noticed that you were not as often present during royal audiences.”

Garnet had noticed these changes too. She had tried her best to convince herself mother knew best, but her private behaviour had also not been the same. Queen Brahne, a tender and loving mother, beloved queen of Alexandria, was growing brash and reckless.

She would not say anything against her to an unknown representative of a foreign power, though.

“My mother, the queen, has been under intense pressure for a while. Your envoys may have seen her act with precipitation and with apparent harshness, but I assure you this has been the result of simple fatigue as she had grave decisions to make on short notice.”

“Perhaps, princess. Burmecia has had so far no reason to question her majesty’s actions. Our king has not been too worried by your mother’s recent activities and behaviour.”

He turned fully and faced her. His arms were crossed on his chest and she could see dragons carved on each piece of his armour.

“However, the Order has been conducting investigations on its own and we do not share the king’s optimistic outlook on this. Some of the queen’s vassals have been mustered with arms and mounts and we do not know why. The standing amazons have been redeployed away from Alexandria and are garrisoned west, all signs of military activity which seems unneeded and has not been announced and explained.”

“Sir...”

“The Order knows you are not aware of this, princess. We had to investigate through our own means to learn about it. The king has already discussed this with your uncle, the Regent. Due to the apparent lack of direct threat from Alexandria, but because this is unprecedented in peacetime, our commanders have judged it appropriate to inform you of the current situation on the advice of the Regent, who deems you trustworthy.”

Two dancers briefly sat beside the Dragon knight and he instantly derailed the conversation, switching to trivial fashion and architecture observations. She played along, intrigued. The Order of Dragon knights was obviously more informed about her own kingdom than she was.

The Dragon knights would not inform the king if their commanders were not certain about this. The king obviously thinks it's serious if he consulted Regent Cid about this. I wish I could speak with uncle.

It all felt both grave and exciting to the ears of a teenage girl who had spent too much time reading knightly romances and fairy tales.

Finally, their neighbours walked away.

“This Burmecian delegation is merely a pretext, princess. They have been sent solely so the Order would be able to contact you through me. Our commanders hope you understand why this has caused concern. The king of Burmecia was ready to levy some troupes, but the Regent has convinced him to take this matter with more diplomacy.”

“How does Regent Cid envision this?”

“Your uncle, in Lindblum, is temporarily incapacitated and cannot make the journey to either Alexandria or Burmecia. He was the one to suggest the Order acts as intermediary. Our nations would like you to make the queen subtly aware that these developments have been noticed and are currently monitored with concern by the neighbouring

kingdoms. An official explanation is expected. We do not suspect foul play but we are nonetheless watching. Would you agree to undertake this in order to foster the peace between our kingdoms?”

Garnet wished nothing more than to be in her room with her books. The evening had been unpleasant enough without her becoming tangled in worrisome political intrigues.

But uncle Cid probably knows best. I will do as he suggested and I'll see him as soon as I can to see what he really thinks. He probably isn't as open with Burmecia as he is with me.

“I will do as the king and the Regent wish. I am convinced this is a misunderstanding that will soon be cleared out.”

“We thank you for your help. Of course, it goes without saying that the Order's implication in this must remain secret. If you were pressured to give the source of this piece of information, the king's advice is that you should say you overheard one of our ambassadors mention the matter. If the queen suspected the hand of military orders in this, she might come to unfortunate conclusions.”

“I will see to it, do not worry for your discretion. I will question my mother because I am curious about this affair myself. I shall send the Regent a message as soon as I have new pieces of the puzzle. You can tell his majesty the king I will alleviate his trouble. I am sure this will turn out to be nothing.”

“I do not doubt it.”

This being said, he rose to his feet and bowed deeply. His face level with hers, he whispered:

“I hope you can also subtly remind your mother that though Burmecia never dealt the first blow in war, it was always victorious. If hostile intentions were confirmed, the Order would crush any opposition, as it always did.”

Before she could say anything, he had merged with the crowd.

She felt a cold chill run down her neck. Burmecian knights had a reputation for military prowess and she did not like being threatened by a representative of their most potent order.

The whole situation worried Garnet. She had noticed her mother’s recent recklessness, she had noticed her becoming distant, but she had not questioned it too much so far. Time passes, people

change. Being almost sixteen, she was in a good position to know how much one's personality can change in just a year. But her mother's behaviour was a State matter and she was supposed to project a dignified royal presence to subjects and foreigners alike, something she had suddenly stopped caring about.

Mother has taken strange decisions. This is not like her, she always acted reasonably. When I thought she didn't, she would explain to me the reason why she had acted in the way she had.

Maybe that was the root of the problem, and what troubled Garnet the most: queen Brahne had always made sure she was “in the know”, as she had to understand State policy. This was how she was supposed to learn how the queen she would be someday ought to think and act. Nowadays, she felt estranged from her mother and she was conspicuously kept away from politics.

As she reflected on this, a tall shadow sat down on her left. This was no burmecian stealthy knight as the clanking of metal boots had announced his presence before she could see him from the corner of her eye.

“Princess, it is delightful to see such a beautiful young lady reflecting and thinking, all by herself, while all the parasites are moving around with no grace, in rhythm with this noise you call music. But it is heartbreaking to see signs of worry on such a pretty face.”

A soft, high-pitched male voice. She could hear his smile in the sound of his voice. She looked at the man and he turned out to be familiar, yet she could not put a name on his face. She had spotted him once or twice in court but they had never conversed and she had no idea who she was. He was a tall, pale handsome young man, around about ten years older than she was. He had incredible white hair and foreign clothes. His legs were crossed and he had thrown an arm around the backrest of his chair.

“I hope the rat has not said anything to cause you trouble. You obviously didn’t enjoy a single second of tonight’s display and now that he’s gone, you’ve seemingly gone from bored to worried.”

Not a trace of reverence in his words, she thought. He had to be important to take such liberty. She detailed him. She had seen all possible variations of sentient species; rat-people, lion-people, Qu people of mysterious origin, and a

hundred other different races. But this man was the most bizarre of all, if only because he had a normal human shape wrapped in an alien air. By all accounts, humans should not be exuding such strangeness.

She decided it all came down to his extravagant outfit. His face featured sensual makeup she would never dare wear. Even as a little girl playing with her mother's powders and rouges, she would have found it inappropriate. His body was clad in white satin with puffy shoulders, a purple vest and...

His lower half was even more scandalous. Thigh-high boots, half a skirt and nothing to cover his stomach. She wagered some harlots in the lowest districts of Lindblum were modestly dressed compared to this. She looked away at the crowd to divert her eyes from him and hoped she was not already blushing at the sight of so much exposed skin.

"I exchanged a few polite words with this knight and was thinking of private matters, sir. May I know who you are? I believe I have seen you before in Alexandria but never had the pleasure to meet you."

"I am Lord Kuja, lady Garnet. I have had the great honour of being chosen by your gracious and

delicate mother to conduct important affairs in Alexandria and abroad in her name. So tell me, did the rat...”

“This dignified burmecian warrior was a Dragon knight, sir Kuja.”

“I’m sorry; did Lord Rat tell you anything worrisome? Do you want him to come back and tell you he is sorry?”

The notion that this effeminate nobody could even raise his voice in the presence of a Dragon knight without being immediately splattered on the wall and floor of at least a few rooms in the castle was ridiculous. The picture of him bossing one around was laughable.

“Sir Kuja, as I told you, we only exchange trivial niceties and I was thinking about something unrelated.”

Now, she was worried. This Lord Kuja was suspiciously insistent.

“Very well, lovely lady,” he said with an emphatic gesture, “but please, would you grace us with a smile to shed some light on this quite terrible party? Do not be preoccupied by whatever this glorious rat warrior has apparently not said to you.

This is supposed to be a happy evening and you have not been very joyful.”

A few seconds passed in silence. She could feel his gaze on her as she focused on a couple, dancing among the crowd. Mostly to keep her own eyes away from him. He was strange and she found him a bit scary. She was used to commoners or courtiers using roundabout euphemisms to address royalty, and most people spoke very defensively in presence of her or her mother. Kuja spoke with irony and libery, as if he considered himself at least her equal. Princess Garnet knew the Lindblum Regent, she had seen Treno aristocrats and their elected temporary representatives, she remembered meeting the Burmecian king when she was about ten or eleven, she knew Cleyran high priests. This man was definitely not a member of any ruling class or even a distant parent of any known political leader. And she knew no court where such attire would be deemed reasonable.

She looked at him with the most sincere fake smile she could display. That was a real skill her mother had taught her. This was not hypocrisy, rather, as Brahne had told her, a “diplomatic concealment of one’s own sentiment”.

“You are right Lord Kuja. I was lost in thought, you caught me off guard. This has been a delightful evening but I have not been totally present to enjoy it so far.”

He gave her a sad look.

“I am not so easily feinted, but your effort is admirable princess. I only wish I could dissolve the dark cloud that shadows your thoughts.”

“Do not be so worried about my wellbeing, sir.”

“Is it not my duty as a loyal servant to our great queen to make sure her daughter and *heiress* is in the best mood possible? I myself have not been entertained tonight and I see you haven’t either. We might be able to keep ourselves company since we are two similar little birds looking from afar as fat worms we’re not allowed to peck are swarming the room.”

This was extremely rude towards the prestigious attendance, but Garnet found it amusing and she held back a smile while watching the dancers. She had noticed his strange emphasis on the word “heiress”, though.

She flinched when his hand delicately moved her hair out of her face and tucked them behind her ears.

“It is delightful to see you smile, lovely princess. This might be the only thing worthwhile tonight.”

“Sir,” she said with as cold a voice as she could, “you talk with too much liberty about my mother’s vassals and our foreign allies. I would appreciate you being more considerate of your words.”

His hand left her hair and she turned to give him a stern look after several silent seconds. He was still looking at her with the most insincere look of repentance.

He’s not even attempting to look apologetic. Who is this man and who does he think he is?

“Pardon me princess. I am but a foreigner and a stranger to the court; I hope you will forgive my lack of manners.”

He rose to his feet.

“Allow me to apologize by entertaining you for a few minutes before I run away to hide my shame. Come and dance with me, princess Garnet, you cannot remain on this chair all night.”

There was no way she was going to dance with him. Queen Brahne was suddenly near them,

followed by captain Steiner in his parade armour and two Burmecians in flowing robes.

“My dear Kuja,” the queen exclaimed, “how are you enjoying this party?”

“Well, great majesty,” he answered enthusiastically, “I was explaining to your delicious daughter how bored I was and I found her quite listless too. This is no place for such a delicate creature as her and as for me, I am quite a grotesque peasant in your noble court.”

“Nonsense,” the queen erupted, “you are the only intelligent person in this room and if this evening does not please you, I shall have everyone out before the red moon is up above the mountains and we’ll discuss our business.”

The surprised look on the Burmecians was priceless. The captain was stoic as ever but he glanced at them, obviously wondering how he would explain to the diplomats that the queen had not really implied she would upset all protocols and remove all foreign envoys from the castle.

“Please don’t, gracious queen. I shall leave soon anyway. I have a long journey ahead of me tomorrow to inspect our affairs in a certain village

and I need to sleep as much as I can before the hardships of the road.”

“In this case, I shall have you escorted back to your resting place. I believe you are staying in town?”

“Do not worry about me, my queen. I was about to offer your precious daughter a dance as I’m worried she’ll crumble under the weight of accumulated boredom.”

This brought a strange, predatory smile on her mother’s face Garnet had never seen. Then the queen covered the lower half of her face with her fan to conceal an exquisitely distinguished bout of contained laughter. Garnet had seen her mother laugh this way all her life, and the juxtaposition with her brash attitude and this uncanny smile brought her more concern. The words of the Dragon knight came back to her mind with added relevance. Her mother had changed a lot and Garnet did not like it.

And she was now slightly afraid.

“Very well” Brahne said before turning to her daughter. “My dear, I hope this evening has not been too excruciating for you. Please have a dance with Lord Kuja and then excuse yourself. I’ll tell

everyone you are feeling unwell. Go read or sleep, I'll have general Beatrix make sure nobody disturbs you."

This was more like her mother.

"Mother, I don't feel like dancing, I..."

"I understand, my dear," the queen told her softly, "but Lord Kuja is a dignified guest and I would be very please if you accepted his request. Please. Then you can leave and you're free to do as you please for tonight. Would you take just a few more minutes of your time for this? That would make me very happy."

"I... Yes, mother."

The queen nodded to the burmecian ambassadors and was on her way.

Well, this can't be so bad. After all, I can see mother is still mostly herself. She probably just has a lot on her mind. I guess she cannot keep babying me forever and I don't have to know every single thing about what she does. Still, if uncle Cid and the king are suspicious, I will make sure everything is fine. I'm sure all this is nothing.

Steiner led the ambassadors out of the hall. As they passed her, he gave her a sorry look as she stared at her feet.

She turned around. Lord Kuja was looking at the crowd, his arms crossed behind his back. He was at least as tall as Steiner, but much less than a Burmecian. Once again, the mental image of this eccentric man disrespecting a Dragon knight seemed ridiculous and his earlier bravado had to be nothing but an arrogant boast he would probably not dare repeat in front of an actual knight.

His long silver hair fell in gracious locks among which a couple of feathers played with the light. She wondered if those were some fashion items or if he was simply less human than she had thought and they were actually part of him.

With a sigh, she came to his side.

“Shall we dance, my lord?”

“I would be delighted, lovely princess.”

He took the hand she presented to him and they made their way to the centre of the room. He faced her, wrapped one arm around her waist and held out her hand. One second later, they were spinning with grace amidst various couples.

He was not too tall for her and he danced gracefully. She had to focus on her steps to avoid making an embarrassing mistake and a few moves passed before she settled in his rhythm. She looked up. He was staring at her. She looked down. A few seconds passed. She looked back up. His eyes immediately met hers.

“You are making me self-conscious” she said, blushing and looking away.

“Don’t be so shy princess. I am just making sure I am not committing any mistake.”

With these words, he tightened his arm around her waist and she was pressed closer against him. His skin was warm through her dress and he smelled like... She could not find the right word to describe it, it was out of this world.

He smells like silver looks.

They waltzed in silence for a few measures. She became hot and slightly dizzy. His embrace became firmer. He was an excellent dancer and even managed to make up for the few missteps she made.

They spun for a few minutes. She was a bit lightheaded.

“Gracious princess, this is the only good thing I will remember from tonight.”

“You are too generous, Lord Kuja, I assure you all pleasure is mine.”

A few more steps in silence. By now, they were so close she did not dare look up. Their faces would be just a few inches apart.

“Have you noticed how your mother has been unrelenting and reckless for a few months?”

Burmecian alarm bells rang urgent warnings in her mind but she remained composed.

“You must have noticed. You are closer to the queen than anyone else.”

“I have noticed no such change. My mother, the queen, has great duties she has to fulfil and she always took great care of her kingdom.”

He bowed his head until his lips were just a few inches from her ear. The smell from his skin and hair was intoxicating.

“Do not worry princess, I am fully aware you and some other people have raised questions about the queen’s recent attitude. But you are right: her only obsession is the glory of Alexandria. If I were you, I

would be in no haste to contact the Regent and the rat-king.”

Something froze in her and she had to focus on her moves to avoid stumbling clumsily.

How does he know?

“I would never...”

“Hush, little princess, he said, do not think you can hide anything from me or your mother. But do not worry, your confusion is understandable. Just rest assured everything will soon be explained to you. The queen has a great project and you will have your part in it.”

She looked up. His eyes immediately locked on to hers. They were so close she could feel his breath. He smiled reassuringly at her. He was very good-looking, she had to admit. Even though she had found his use of makeup strangely unmanly and grotesque at first, she now saw from up close that it was applied with masterful strokes and it complimented his features exquisitely. She felt a warm bubble soar inside of herself and became intensely aware of his hands on her body. His skin burned hers through the fabric of her dress and

gloves. Her heartbeat went up and she suddenly found herself short of breath.

His hand snaked up to the back of her neck. All warmth inside her turned to ice.

“Lord Kuja, there are other people in this room, please refrain from...”

“Do not worry, I doubt anybody here will notice.”

She looked around. The party was going on smoothly but she was a spectator to it all. Not one of the guests seemed to see her and her partner. They seemed remarkably invisible.

Magic?

“What does that mean? Is this your work?”

“A very simple trick for the great illusionist I am. Don’t worry, nobody in this room can see or hear us, we are free to say and do what we want.

His hand left her neck and settled on the small of her back. He took her for a few spins.

Garnet’s mind was a mess. One part was on the verge of panic. The other was exited beyond belief by the situation. She had spent hours watching the clock count the seconds one by one, hoping anything

would happen, before she was contacted by an envoy from Burmecia and Lindblum. And now she was dancing away the night with this beautiful, charming, elegant but bizarre and disturbing magician who obviously knew a lot she didn't about her mother's plans.

Still flustered, she evaluated how she should act.

This man obviously has mother's trust. I don't know exactly what his business is but if he is related to her change in attitude, he might know something about what the knight said. I cannot confront mother directly, but I'll probe her about him and report who he is to uncle Cid.

I need to discuss all of this with someone who can help me understand what's happening.

She could not ask Steiner or Beatrix for help — they were too devoted to the queen — and she had no close friend to listen to her. At least no friend who could help her with this type of intrigue, and she needed to lay all the facts as plainly as possible. She wanted someone to help her detangle this charade. She liked to perform scenes from Lord Avon's play with a small group of servants, all of whom were about as old as her, but they were only friendly partners to pass the time with no knowledge

regarding politics and none of them could — or should — be privy to her interrogations about the court.

I need to see uncle Cid in person as soon as possible. The knight said he was incapacitated for now, I must go to Lindblum.

“I wish you would come out your shell, ease your mind and enjoy the moment, princess.”

Ah, yes, she was still waltzing with this Kuja.

“You spend all the evening skulking and being bored. I totally understand why, of course, but now that you’re no longer alone in a corner, please allow yourself to have at least a little fun.”

“I am not feeling very well sir.”

“That’s what your mother will tell everyone later. Spare me these polite lies, they bear the mark of diplomacy and all the hypocrisy that comes with it. I don’t want you to think I’m just another nobleman wasting his time here to earn a few gils or a favour from the queen.”

“We have not been properly introduced, Lord Kuja. I know mother holds you in high regard, but I have never met you before and I have no idea why

you came to me tonight when there are so many gentlemen and honourable ladies around who would probably be better suited to keep you company.”

“Let me just mention this: your mother doesn’t know much more about me than you do. She only cares that I provide her with certain services nobody else can offer and this serves Alexandria. Apart from that, I like to keep my private life as private as possible and I don’t share too much about myself. You see, what I have to give is precious and rare.”

For someone who keeps to himself, you talk an awful lot.

“For what it’s worth, pretty princess, we have a lot in common.”

“Really? How so?”

“Well you see, you spend a lot of time buried in your books and you prefer these fantasy worlds because everything there seems beautiful and full of purpose, whereas you find dull reality disappointing. I myself am naturally attracted to beauty and this world has so far left a lot to be desired in this regard.”

He leaned down towards her.

“Maybe that’s why I am talking to you right now. After all, you are by far the prettiest thing around. I would rather talk about your well-known love of theatre and gorge my eyes on you than keep exchanging small talk with all these leeches in your mother’s court.”

He pressed her body against his and she felt his bare skin through the thin fabric of her dress.

She tried to say something but managed only a confused stutter. Paradoxically, she was glad he held her so tight. She was certain she would be shaking otherwise.

There was something sinister about him, as if he heralded something terrible, but he was also incredibly gracious, his every move was elegant and precise, his face beamed with charm and while the word “effeminate” had crossed her mind on seeing him for the first time, he now seemed prodigiously masculine and powerful. She felt small and vulnerable. Yet, even though she knew they could not be seen or heard, she was not exactly afraid.

Is he using another spell? Is something not right with me?

Garnet knew some elementary white magic and she could feel spells being used around her, but she had not detected his first one and she knew it would not be beyond him to stealthily cast another one directly on her.

Is this the reason why he seems so...

But his first spell was a powerful one and nobody had felt anything as it came into force. If his powers were such, he would have no trouble making her immediately attracted to him and he could make it so she wouldn't even be able to question her own emotions.

The music would not stop and she found herself hoping it wouldn't. His presence was both appeasing and unnerving. Each time his hand moved on her back, she felt a small electric shock. Everything about him was exquisite. She was so caught up in the sensation her mind could simply not focus on whatever he had said so far and the way he had been dismissive of everyone and sweating with mean-spirited irony from the first second.

By now, his embrace was so tight her flushed cheek grazed his collarbone. Her face was burning and she was sure she was redder than the huge rose Beatrix carried on the handle of her sword. She felt

hot and light when she caught the metallic, otherworldly smell of his hair. With every breath, his chest moved against hers, sending tingles all over her skin.

When she looked up at his face, his eyes were closed and he seemed lost in the dance.

And there, finally, the music ended. He opened his eyes and smiled at her, the most seductive and desirable smile she had ever seen — or imagined.

He leaned forward and his lips almost met hers. She leaned back, desperately trying to keep him away, but his hold on her was firm and it only made their bodies fit even tighter. She could not look away from his eyes, a deep shade of blue that looked almost unnatural. Out of this world.

“Princess?”

The deep voice of Steiner wrenched her away from these gigantic blue eyes.

Kuja and Garsed both looked sideways at the knight. He stood in the doorway, looking embarrassed and confused.

He’s just outside the room. Kuja said nobody inside the hall could see or hear us, but the spell

must end exactly there.

“What is it, tin-can?” an annoyed Kuja exclaimed, “Can’t you see the princess is busy right now?”

He did not release his hold on her and she was not allowed to move out of this scandalous position.

“Princess, I am sorry to interrupt, but I need to speak to you about *sensible* matter.”

There was no mistaking his tone and emphasis: this had to be discussed away from outsiders and he was targeting Mr. Dancing Wizard.

“Thank you Steiner, I’ll be there right away”, she said with a bit more urgency than was appropriate.

Kuja straightened and let her go. Her heart was still racing but her head was cool now that they had been interrupted. He took her hands in his.

“Adorable, beautiful princess, I hope we can dance again sometime. I already miss your soft touch.”

He kissed the air above her fingers and smirked mischievously at her.

“Have a nice evening; you have played your part perfectly tonight.”

He took a few steps back, blew her a kiss and walked away.

Garnet was stuck in place. The whole thing had been bizarre and dreamlike. She was still warm inside and lightheaded. She still felt his hands where he had been touching her and the smell of his indefinable perfume lingered on her skin. She had to press her hands against each other so they would stop shaking and her knees felt weak. Now that he was gone, she found herself wanting more of the delicious sensations his presence brought.

She met Steiner just outside the hall. She knew he had nothing to tell her, but the captain had always made it his duty to see to her wellbeing. He had probably disposed of the burmecian ambassadors as fast as he could and come back with this made up excuse so she could leave as soon as possible.

“Steiner, you have been my saviour tonight.”

He smiled as they walked out of the great hall.

“I’m glad to hear it. I noticed you weren’t enjoying the reception very much.”

Why the apologetic tone?

“I wasn’t, this has been a terrible evening for me and I want nothing more than to go to my room and sleep away this boredom.”

He looked relieved, if surprised.

“Oh, well good. For a minute, I thought I had made a mistake. You seemed to be enjoying dancing after all.”

She shrugged dismissively. Steiner saluted when they arrived at the door of her suite. Garnet thanked him then locked herself in her room and sat on the bed.

Her hands were still shaking and she was still warm inside.

That night, she dreamt of the warm embrace of a silvery angel.

Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Copyright Information	2
Table of Contents	3
Summary	4
1. Shall we dance?	5